

Wabash.

August 17, 2020

To: The Wabash Community
From: President Feller and Professor Taylor
Subject: Week 2 Update

We want to thank everyone for the positive spirit that members of the community displayed last week, as well as the grace and appreciation they showed to others, as we began a semester unlike any that we have known. Many of our new operating procedures went well, some better than any of us expected, while others left us frustrated and modifying plans in real time. But overall, we feel that improvements are possible and that the goal of residential education remains achievable, though as we have emphasized from the beginning it is certainly not guaranteed.

An important variable in our planning over the past months has been the level of “community spread” at the College, which basically is the percentage of people who have COVID-19 at any point in time. This is a critical metric because many of the resources we need are proportional to the percentage of infected individuals, including the number of students we need to support in isolation and quarantine. At the beginning of the summer, we thought that we might need to deal with 1% COVID prevalence among students, faculty, and staff, though as was reported in the mid-July Chapel Talk, the data both locally and across the nation suggested we could experience a much higher level, trends that unfortunately continued.

The uncertainty in estimating community spread led us to pursue the CVS Return Ready testing program to provide a baseline value that could inform our plans for the early weeks of the term and give us insight into the extent that our mitigation tactics are, or are not, reducing COVID prevalence over the course of the semester. While the surging demand for tests over the past two weeks complicated our efforts, we were able to obtain results for nearly all students and, despite a small number of inconclusive tests and others that had to be taken on campus, we have a robust sample with a 2% positivity rate.

While this is higher than we hoped, it is not completely unexpected. What it does mean is that unless we reduce the prevalence on campus, we will stretch our capacity to isolate and quarantine students, and we will continue to send those students home unless it is absolutely impossible to do so. As we reported last week, we have already activated the system to isolate any student with a confirmed or presumed case of COVID-19 and to quarantine his close contacts. It is important to emphasize that all of our planning hinges on careful adherence to physical distancing guidelines – all of our classrooms, living units, and dining areas have been set up this way. A breakdown of these guidelines is defined as a separation of less than six feet for a period of time greater than 15 minutes. We must maintain our distance if we are to stay together.

To monitor changes in community spread we have initiated a program of surveillance testing through random sampling of asymptomatic students that we expect to continue throughout the semester. Given upward pressure on turn-around times, it is unclear when we will have an update on community spread, though 7-10 days, is a reasonable estimate. Additionally, we are exploring options for rapid, antigen-based testing to complement our PCR-based testing, but there are numerous challenges associated with this approach as well.

The myriad challenges that our nation faces with COVID-19 testing make us even more reliant on careful monitoring of symptoms. Please make sure that you have a daily routine that includes submission of temperature and symptoms through the Wabash COVID app before coming to campus. While it is difficult to get a precise count on residential learners prior to census, it appears that about 87% of students submitted data each day of classes last week and that nearly 100% of faculty and staff adopted this routine. If you are having any trouble using the app, please contact the [IT Services Helpdesk](#) as soon as possible. Repeated failure to monitor symptoms at this point will result in students being sent home from campus.

We are grateful to our students and colleagues across the College who have embraced the challenges associated with residential learning and communal living during a pandemic. Our student CARE Team is simply amazing. We firmly believe it is the best program of its kind in the nation. Our colleagues in the Student Health Center, including numerous staff members redeployed from other areas of the College, are working incredibly long hours. Just as we have finite capacity to house isolated and quarantined students, so too we have limited human resources to provide health care and remote instruction to individual students. If those resources are exceeded, we will have no choice but to end residential education and have students return to their homes.

One final note directed to students: We have been proud of what we are seeing in academic buildings and outdoor spaces, but it is clear that communal living provides the greatest challenge to maintaining a healthy campus. You must police your own living spaces, remind people of best practices, and hold your peers accountable. You can't wait for cases to appear on campus to adopt the three W's and avoid the three C's. COVID-19 is on campus. How it progresses will be entirely determined by the choices you make.